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REX BUTLER'S BAUDRILLARD

PHILOFICTION   BAUDRILLARD, COLLECTION, DOUBLE, PRODUCTION, REAL, SEDUCTION

Simulation

I'm going to spend a couple of posts pulling out some extracts from Rex Butler's book on Baudrillard, widely considered to be one of the more subtle readings in the secondary literature (a view even expressed by the man himself—no small accolade).

I'll start with what Butler takes to be the central problematic that runs throughout Baudrillard's career:

> *We would say—and we hope to demonstrate—that there is but one simple paradox of the sign repeated throughout all of Baudrillard's work. It is that, insofar as the copy completely resembles the original, it is no longer a copy but but another original; or, to invert this, that the copy is only able to resemble the original insofar as it is different from it. (Butler, 1999, p. 14)*

First thing to note about this is that it frames Baudrillard as primarily concerned with semiological systems *in general*. This is a theme Butler sticks to throughout the book—while this orientation does place an illuminating focus on certain methodological quandaries that arise for Baudrillard as a theorist, I also felt that it tended to downplay the emphasis Baudrillard himself places on *particular* semiological structures, specifically the ones we currently find ourselves in and on the concrete historical path that got us here. This focus gives the book what I can only describe as a "Derridean" tint, complete with all the "affirming the paradox" type tropes distinctive of 90's secondary lit. Exhibit A:

> *However, if simulation is irrefutable, if any outside to it is only conceivable because of it, at the same time the statement that makes this possible also makes it impossible. The very statement which means there is no outside to simulation, that simulation is total, also means there is an outside to simulation, that simulation is not total. (Butler, 1999, p. 152)*

There's a lot of this kind of stuff, which I think is unnecessarily mystifying. Ultimately it results from trying too hard to detach Baudrillard's claims about simulation from the historical particularities they pertains to. (Butler does not give much attention to Baudrillard's engagement with and extension of Marx's critique of value, for instance, which seems central to me.)

Anyway—despite finding myself in disagreement with Butler quite often, these tended to be fairly illuminating disagreements, and he certainly provided a wealth of great insights. I'll go through a couple of comments on what he takes to be common misunderstandings of Baudrillard notion of simulation. Here's the first:

> *[W]hat must be grasped first of all about simulation is that it is not only the loss of reality, but also its very possibility. The aim of simulation is not to do away with reality, but on the contrary to realize it, make it real. Simulation in this sense is not a form of illusion, but opposed to illusion, a way of getting rid of the fundamental illusionality of the world. (Butler, 1999, pp. 23–4)*

I agree with Butler's assessment here but think this way of putting it is confusing. The main claim being made is that Baudrillard understands "reality"—in the sense of intersubjective or consensus reality—as an *effect* of particular discursive practices. I tend to reach for Brecht as an interpretive lens on this particular issue: Brecht criticised Western bourgeois theatre on the basis that its representational character (its "naturalism") results from an artificial separation of the audience from the narrative space of the performance. The notion of representational fidelity only makes sense in light of this displacement of the viewer to an Archimedean point outside the narrative space—it does not happen, for instance, in the Chinese opera (Brecht's example), where the actor is constantly making contact with the audience *as a member of their social space*, via eye contact and other gestures. The theatrical distinction between the real and the imaginary, which

supports the possibility of a representation relationship between them, is itself only possible on the basis of the staging apparatus: it is a technical effect.

Similarly I think Baudrillard sees the various items of consensus reality as byproducts of certain discursive practices, which both establish a disjunction between two terms (the real and its imaginary) and position the subject at an abstract point outside of the space of participation. Take this often quoted passage from Symbolic Exchange and Death:

> The symbolic is neither a concept, an agency, a category, nor a 'structure',
> but an act of exchange and a social relation which puts an end to the real,
> which resolves the real, and, at the same time, puts an end to the
> opposition between the real and the imaginary. (Baudrillard, 1993, p. 133)

By my reading, what Baudrillard is here calling the 'symbolic' is a massive generalisation of what Brecht called 'interruption'—the fourth-wall breaking act which establishes a relation of *recognition* between perform and viewer, thus undermining the boundary between the space of the narrative world and the space of observation. He continues:

> The initiatory act is the reverse of our reality principle. It shows that the reality of birth
> derives solely from the separation of life and death. Even the reality of life itself derives
> solely from the disjunction of life and death. The effect of the real is only ever therefore
> the structural effect of the disjunction between two terms, and our famous reality
> principle, with its normative and repressive implications, is only a generalisation of this
> disjunctive code to all levels. The reality of nature, its 'objectivity' and its 'materiality',
> derives solely from the separation of man and nature[.] (Baudrillard, 1993, p. 133)

The adoption of this 'disjunctive code' as part of discursive practice functions similarly to Brecht's staging apparatus, simultaneously:

- creating a disjunction between the imaginary and the real (or between thought and world, the sign and its referent).
- making possible the notion of an explicit representation relation between them.
- displacing the subject to a view-from-nowhere, a point *outside* the world from which the representation relation may be grasped.

There's a paradoxical air to the notion that the reality of nature derives from the separation of man and nature. But really the point is just that when one is unseparated from nature—i.e. when the relation between man and nature is *participatory*—nature is not a graspable content but rather a *horizon* of all grasping activities, and is unrepresentable as such. When nature as a whole becomes available as a *content*, as one relata of the representation relation, one is implicitly suspending participation in it, and entering the detached space of the view-from-nowhere.

Read this way, Butler seems to be identifying as 'simulation' the introduction of the disjunction that produces the real: the reality principle. (Seduction, or the initiatory act, can then be read as the reverse process—the liquidation of the reality principle, or destruction of the view-from-

nowhere—that plunges one back into the surreal space of participation.) I think this is a plausible reading given how confusing and contradictory Baudrillard can be about this, but as mentioned it sticks fast to a generalist interpretation. It interprets simulation as the process that moves up the ladder of simulacra levels; what it doesn't do is focus in on Baudrillard's explicit tying of simulation to *3rd*-order simulacra, and the particular significance of *3rd*-order simulacra within the organisational logic of the present cultural milieu.

This is worth bearing in mind for Butler's second comment:

> *The other thing to be understood about simulation, the other mistake often made with regard to it, is that it is not an empirical phenomenon, something that actually happens. Baudrillard is very well aware of the paradox that, insofar as the simulation he is describing exists, it makes any way of verifying it impossible. It means that the very real which we say is lost in simulation and against which we compare it is now only conceivable in simulated form. Indeed, we might even say that, insofar as we can speak of simulation at all, it has not yet occurred, that simulation is proved in its absence. Simulation is not real, then, but a kind of hypothesis. (Butler, 1999, p. 24)*

Again I'm kind of half on board with this—while I agree that there is a sense that simulation is not something that 'actually happens', I would also want to stress that it nevertheless has 'actual' effects. The point being alluded to here is that simulation involves a kind of *social causality*—is has no substantial reality in the sense that it belongs entirely to the realm of the social imaginary, to our collective expectations or perceptions of one another's perceptions. But since we are the kind of creatures who base our actions on these perceptions, this means simulation can have causal influence in the real world, despite not being part of it per se. In this sense simulation is similar to concepts like hyperstition or hauntology—what in more Deleuzian terms might be called the "agency of the virtual." But Baudrillard's account contains far more fine-structure, identifying simulation explicitly at the interface between social reality, semiology, and normative pragmatics.

I'll stop there for now—in the next post I'll address some comparisons Butler makes between simulation and seduction.

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Seduction

Butler makes a comparison between simulation and Baudrillard's concept of seduction:

> *Indeed, what is crucial to realize is about simulation is that it is not finally distinguishable from that second term we will be looking at here, seduction, and in a way is only another version of it (as seduction is only another version of simulation). The two are respective sides of the same phenomenon. What is this phenomenon? It is that paradox of representation we spoke of in*

our Introduction where, if the copy comes too close to the original, it no longer resembles it but is another original. There is thus an absolute limit to how close a copy can come to the original while still resembling it, or the copy only resembles the original insofar as it is different from it. And it is this limit that simulation is subject to. Simulation attempts to resemble the real, to 'realize' it, to bring out what is only implicit in it and make it explicit. But at a certain point in its progress it draws too close to the original, and further increases in perfection, instead of bringing the system closer to this original, only drive it further away. The system begins to reverse upon itself, gives rise to the opposite effects of those intended. It is this reversibility, this difference between the original and the copy, that we call seduction. But seduction, therefore, as this difference between the original and the copy, is at once what imposes a limit upon simulation and causes it to come into being. This is why seduction is not opposed to simulation but is rather its limit—a limit that makes it both possible and impossible. (Butler, 1999, p. 25)

Seduction is here conceived as the difference between the real and its copy, while simulation is the "attempt to resemble the real." Seduction is therefore a *condition* of simulation, of the *de facto* introduction of a representation relation (as discussed in the previous post). Furthermore, the tendency of simulacra to come closer and closer to the real they represent ultimately undermines simulation's own conditions of possibility.

This is quite astute, I think. Like Derrida, Baudrillard is concerned with both the limits and conditions of systems of meaning, and—also like Derrida—Baudrillard makes the enigmatic suggestion that the limits of these systems are part of their own conditions of possibility. (Elsewhere I've noted the suggestive affinity between this idea and the incompleteness theorem.) This also helps to situate Baudrillard's historical claim: that we have moved into a phase of simulation in which the representation has come so close to the real that it undercuts its own conditions of possibility, demoting the symbolic to a kind of phantom existence:

So it is with life and death in our current system: the price we pay for the 'reality' of this life, to live it as a positive value, is the ever-present phantasm of death. For us, defined as living beings, death is our imaginary. So, all the disjunctions on which the different structures of the real are based (this is not in the least abstract: it is also what separates the teacher from the taught, and on which the reality principle of their relation is based; the same goes for all the social relations we know) have their archetype in the fundamental disjunction of life and death. This is why, in whatever field of 'reality', every separate term for which the other is its imaginary is haunted by the latter as its own death. (Baudrillard, 1993, p. 133)

Butler continues:

[I]f simulation attempts to cross the distance between the original and the copy that allows their resemblance, seduction is both the distance that allows this resemblance and the distance that arises when this space is crossed. Seduction is the necessity of taking the other into account when trying to produce resemblance. It is that limit we cannot go beyond in our relationship to the other (another person, the real) if we still want to maintain a connection with

> *it. Indeed, against all interpretations of it as a form of sexual coercion, seduction is the idea*
> *that the other cannot be forced to follow, that in any such forcing there is always an ambiguity,*
> *a resistance possible by the other. Seduction is the idea that we cannot have a relationship*
> *without this undecidability, without it being impossible to determine whether it is we who lead*
> *the other or the other who leads us. (Butler, 1999, pp. 72–73)*

Butler crosses over several different points here, but they can perhaps made clearer in light of the analogy with Brecht. Seduction, I argued in the previous post, can be approached via the Brechtian concept of interruption—the moment at which the performer enters into state of mutual recognition the audience, collapsing the distinction between the imaginary space of the narrative and the view-from-nowhere occupied by its observer. This is to pull the audience back inside the space of participation from which they were displaced by the staging apparatus, dissolving the real as a content or referent and reinstating it as a horizon. The undecidability of seduction, then, is a product of the *reciprocity* of recognition. This is a normative reciprocity, a bi-directional acknowledgement of an obligation, or pact—undecidable because unconditional, its content never fixed in advance (unlike the contract).

Unpacking this further, the first question we might ask is: why must producing resemblance even involve "an other" in the first place? This question can perhaps be answered in Brandomian terms by noting that this issue concerns the relation between semantic (or representational) content and the underlying normative pragmatics. Applying Kripkenstein-type objections to private language (Kripke, 1982), we might claim that the stabilisation of semantic content depends on a discursive community immersed in language-games structured by particular rules (particular forms of exchange, in Baudrillard's terms). Representation is, in the first place, a social practice. This discursive community is itself structured by social relations; the determination of content at the semantic level is therefore ultimately contingent on the normative relations of the discursive community who exchange such contents.

When these relations take the form of reciprocal recognition—"taking the other into account when trying to produce resemblance"—the rules that govern the language-game are left implicit (in the unconditional pact no contractual conditions are specified), and in this sense the semantic content of any utterance is always up for grabs, its parameters forever left in play. I think Baudrillard wants to say that this implicit indeterminacy—not total, of course, but partial—is the essence of true communication. Communication consists not in the trading of messages under a predetermined set of conventional rules, but in the constant renegotiation of those very rules (see e.g. Requiem for the Media (Baudrillard, 2019, p. 194)). Consequently, any system which *over*-determines semantic content by making the rules of the language-game *too* explicit (at the social level we might think of the contractual relation, exhaustively defined by its explicit conditions) necessarily undermines communication, and ultimately self-consciousness itself.

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The Collection

My previous post concluded with the distinction between the observance of a rule with pre-determined content, and the constant renegotiation of the content of a rule, suggesting that in Baudrillard's eyes only the latter constitutes a process of communication. (And given Baudrillard's further commitment to the symbolically mediated structure of subjectivity, this has deep implications for human self-consciousness as such). One early place this shows up is in Baudrillard's discussion of 'the subjective register of objects' in the System of Objects (Baudrillard, 1996). Butler:

> *[T]he most profound expression of this subjective relationship to objects […] is the collection. The important thing about the collection is not what is gathered together, its objective status in the world. Within the collection, even the most apparently functional objects, say 'carpets' or 'compasses', are understood no longer in terms of any external use they might have, but only in terms of the place they occupy inside it. […] The unity of the pieces in a collection, that is, is not to be found in the objects themselves but only in the collector, because they all stand in for or express the subjectivity of the collector. (Butler, 1999, p. 76)*

In the collection the functional roles of objects are suspended and superseded by the differential relations they stand in with respect to other objects in the collection. The ordering of these differential relations—the system of rules they follow—is an expression of the collector's subjectivity.

> *Baudrillard brilliantly connects this with the idea that the collection only exists, has meaning, insofar as a piece is missing from it—a piece he explicitly associates with the collector him- or her-self. […] It is this missing piece that severs the collection from external reality, the functional order of objects, by making it less than it; but it is also this missing piece that allows the collection to resemble reality, the subjectivity of the collector, in its very difference from it. (Butler, 1999, pp. 77–78)*

There's a lot going on here, but at this point fundamentally we're just being asked to agree that this is what serious collecting is like—that the whole thrill of the collection rides on this missing piece, the rule that orders the existing objects always containing a lack that points to something beyond itself, and that grappling with this lack is in the essence of collecting.

> *This the meaning of the anecdote Baudrillard retells from La Bruyère concerning a connoisseur who gives up collecting because he is unable to track down the final print in his collection, and in fact is willing to swap the rest of his collection for this piece; but who, when he finally does obtain it, soon loses interest in his collection because it is now closed, self-contained, no longer requires his subjectivity to be completed. (Butler, 1999, p. 78)*

The important part comes now:

All this is perhaps the true dynamic of the collection, its at once 'satisfying' and 'disappointing' quality. In one sense, a good collection is always moving away from any objective quality linking its components—this is too much like mere accumulation. The good collection instead has a difficult, hard to discern quality connecting its various parts. Ideally, it is something that can only be seen by the collector. And this is perhaps the true 'dialectic' of the collection. Each piece in the collection does not simply add to the ones before it, follow a pre-established rule. On the contrary, it attempts to be different from the other pieces, to sum up all that comes before it, adopt the position of the last piece in the collection—the subjectivity of the collector —that all the previous ones have in common. In other words, each additional piece in the collection seeks to draw out some new quality linking the others that has not been seen before. It adds something that at first does not seem like those others, but that in retrospect allows us to perceive a new commonality between them. It wants to show that the summing-up attempted by the previous piece was only partial, that though it was thought to end the series, to occupy a meta-position with regard to it, it is in fact only part of a larger series it does not see, is no different from the rest. (Butler, 1999, p. 78)

If the objects of the collection are like points drawn on a graph, the "objective quality linking its components" is the curve that connects them. In this analogy, 'mere accumulation' would be to simply extrapolate the curve further and keep drawing more dots that conform to its trajectory. But in the true collection, the new point on the graph requires a redrawing of the whole curve—in fact it is this very process of *re*-connecting that constitutes the practice of collecting.

But this also why the collection can never be completed. As we say, each new piece attempts to be the last piece in the collection, to be the single thing all the others have in common, to occupy the position of the subject; but insofar as it is able to do this, to be compared to those others in this way, it opens up the possibility of another piece coming after it, speaking of what it and the rest of the collection have in common. The collection as it grows gets closer to this condition of singularity, of having only one thing in common—we might also say nothing in common—but the comparison that makes this possible also makes it impossible. The very thing that allows any particular piece to occupy the position of the subject also means that subject is excluded, that the subject is what all the pieces have in common necessarily comes after it. However, we would say that the collection—the practice of collecting—is exactly an attempt to realize this, the economy of this failure. The pleasure of collecting—its at once 'satisfying' and 'disappointing' quality—is that each piece seeks to complete the collection and yet knows that it cannot, and does not even want to. (Butler, 1999, p. 79)

What struck me about this discussion is how similar it is to the structure of recollective rationality that Brandom sees as a keystone of Hegel's developed picture (often illustrated in ASOT by the example of 'common' or judge-made law):

Exercising this kind of rationality is retrospectively rationally reconstructing the various applications of a concept, selecting a trajectory through the actual uses that picks out a sequence that is expressively progressive. That is one that has the form of gradual, cumulative revelation, the emergence into ever-greater explicitness, of the contours of a determinately

> *contentful norm that is seen to have been implicit all along. (Brandom, 2019, p. 17)*

But where Brandom stresses the expressively progressive character of this process–each new object in the collection 'summing up' the previously ones, including the previous rules that were taken to connect them—which can leave his exposition seeming Whiggish, Baudrillard stresses the critical importance of the unfinishedness of this process, the always-remaining indeterminacy which is the condition of dialectical movement itself. This focus leads Baudrillard to ask questions that don't even come up for Brandom: if history, novelty, and subjectivity are constitutively dependent on this indeterminacy, this space in which the renegotiation of the rules can occur, then what happens when the logic of 'mere accumulation' is imposed as a universal constraint—when one is no longer allowed to renegotiated the rules, because one is required to set the rule at the beginning and then stick to it? And it is this question which frames Baudrillard's thinking on power and control.

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